

Greek American Oral History Project

Oral History Interview

with

Speros Sarlis

April 29, 2006
Sacramento, California

By Anne Rapaport
Capital Campus Oral History Program
California State University, Sacramento

Greek American Oral History Project

Interview History for Oral History of
Speros Sarlis

Interviewer's Name: Anne Rapaport

Interview Date and Location: The interview was conducted on April 29, 2006 at Mr. Sarlis' home in Sacramento, California.

Context Notes: Mr. Sarlis is the son of Greek immigrant parents. During the interview his wife was present at times and interjected in the interview. Background noises like dishes being washed and Mrs. Sarlis coming in and out of the room are present throughout the tape. Verbal indicators like "um" and "uh" were removed in the transcript.

Tapes and Interview Records: The original tape recording of the interview and a full transcript are held by the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Sacramento. Copies of the recording and transcript are deposited with the Department of Special Collections and University Archives at California State University, Sacramento.

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

MRS. SARLIS: Would you like something to drink honey?

RAPAPORT: Just some water would be good.

MRS. SARLIS: 7-up? Water?

RAPAPORT: Water.

MRS. SARLIS: Oh, okay.

RAPAPORT: This interview is being conducted with Spero SARLIS on April 29, 2006

for the California State University Sacramento and Greek Orthodox
Church Oral History Project. So, let's begin just by talking about your
background. Where were you born and when?

SARLIS: I was born in Buffalo, New York 18th of June '31.

RAPAPORT: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother – when and where she was
born?

SARLIS: My parents were both born in Greece on the island of Kefalonia on the west
coast of Greece.

RAPAPORT: Can you describe a little bit about the place that they came from?

SARLIS: It's an island, it's an island and it's pretty rough there and my mother was born
in a little town of St. George. My father was born in a little town of [?] on
the island. And my father came to the states first and later on my mother
came over through Ellis Island.

RAPAPORT: Were they married in Greece?

SARLIS: Yes, yes they were.

RAPAPORT: How did your parents earn a living in Greece?

SARLIS: They came over here when they were very young they hadn't had to work, but after my father came over here he opened up a hat cleaning store in Buffalo, New York. He cleaned hats and shined shoes and pressed pants for men that wanted their pants pressed.

RAPAPORT: Did your mother work?

SARLIS: No, no my mother stayed home.

RAPAPORT: When did – was your dad the first person in your family to emigrate from Greece?

SARLIS: Pardon me?

RAPAPORT: Was he the first person in your family to chose to come here?

SARLIS: Yes, yes he was.

RAPAPORT: Can you talk about the reasons that they chose to leave?

SARLIS: Cause most of the people over there wanted to come to the United States for a better way of life and the United States was a better way of life, you know? Over there, there wasn't too much to do.

RAPAPORT: Do you think that your parent's impressions of the United States before they came and then what they experienced were different?

SARLIS: I don't know if they had any expressions before they left but after they got here they just started working.

RAPAPORT: Do you know – did they intend to move to the United States permanently or temporarily?

SARLIS: I think everybody says that they are just going to come over here temporarily but nobody ever does [laughs]. Everybody stays after they come here, you know? Everybody stays.

RAPAPORT: Do you think that, um, do you know how they felt when they were leaving Greece?

SARLIS: No I don't, no.

RAPAPORT: How did they get to the US?

SARLIS: By ship, by ship.

RAPAPORT: Did they ever tell you anything about their separate journey's I guess.

SARLIS: No.

RAPAPORT: Did they both come through Ellis Island?

SARLIS: Yes, I believe they did. I believe, I think at that time everybody went through Ellis Island.

RAPAPORT: Did they decide to move to Sacramento or did you move to Sacramento later on?

SARLIS: Later on, yeah. Yeah first we went from Buffalo to, we went to Portland, Oregon and we stayed there for a short time. It's very, very rainy in Portland, Oregon, you know it rains almost every day. And the rain was bothering my father quite a bit, his arthritis. So then we decided to come down here to Lodi on a farm where my uncle lived on a farm. We stayed there for a short period of time and then we moved to Sacramento.

RAPAPORT: Do you know how, did they ever have any problems finding work? If your

dad was starting his own business, then probably not.

SARLIS: No at that time it was pretty easy, I understand, for my father to find work. At one period of time he owned a small café on the lower part of K Street, right about where Macy's is right now. And then later on he owned another business across the street from Libby's cannery. Another restaurant.

RAPAPORT: Did your parents speak English when they came?

SARLIS: Well, very little, very little. They learned after they got here.

RAPAPORT: Did they pursue American citizenship?

SARLIS: Yes they did. My father became a citizen first and later on, much later on, my mother became an American citizen. In fact I helped her.

RAPAPORT: Do you know why she chose to wait?

SARLIS: Just procrastination. And later on when my mother got her citizenship papers she actually didn't believe that she got her papers. [laughs]

RAPAPORT: Did your parents ever talk about Greece or wanting to go back when you were young, growing up?

SARLIS: My father did go back, several times, but my mother never did. She didn't want to go back, you know? She just wanted to stay here and take care of her children.

RAPAPORT: Did they keep in touch with people in Greece?

SARLIS: Oh yeah. My father especially. My father, you know, my mother couldn't,

couldn't write so she didn't, but my father keeps in touch with people back there.

RAPAPORT: Do you think they had any difficulties adjusting to life in the United States at all?

SARLIS: I don't think so, no.

RAPAPORT: This is kind of a different section, but more centered on your life. Can you tell me the names and birth years of your siblings – if you have any.

SARLIS: I have one sister and she's one year younger than I am.

RAPAPORT: Have you ever gone back to the house where you grew up in New York or in Oregon?

SARLIS: I did, I did go back one time, but I understand right now it's, that whole street Elm Street has been, was knocked down and they made a freeway out of it. So it's no longer there. [laughs]

RAPAPORT: How long did you live in New York for?

SARLIS: Until I was about 12 years old.

RAPAPORT: So you started going to school in New York?

SARLIS: Yes, yes.

RAPAPORT: What are some of your earliest memories as a child?

SARLIS: Well I went to PS 15 – they number schools, out here they go by individual names but back there they number the schools – and I remember first, second grade, third grade and then we moved out, out here.

RAPAPORT: Was there a large Greek community where you grew up?

SARLIS: Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact at that time they tended to, the nationalities tended to stay in an area, you know? Very close to other Greek families. So we stayed in Oak Street – it was called Oak Street.

RAPAPORT: Did you, how did you do in school? Did you like school?

SARLIS: Yes. Yes I did like school.

RAPAPORT: Did you go to a regular school and then a Greek school ever?

SARLIS: Yes, yes after American school we went to Greek school and learned Greek right.

RAPAPORT: Can you talk about that experience a little bit?

SARLIS: Well, that was about what we did after American school. After it let around three, three o'clock around four we went to Greek school and learned Greek, you know?

RAPAPORT: Just speaking or writing?

SARLIS: Yes, mostly speaking, mostly speaking. There wasn't too much writing.

RAPAPORT: Did you like going to Greek school?

SARLIS: Yeah, yeah because all my friends would go so we would meet together.

RAPAPORT: Is that where you met Eugene? [laughs]

SARLIS: No, no, no no, Eugene came much later. After we were here in Sacramento.

RAPAPORT: Do you know what your parents aspirations for you when you were growing up were?

SARLIS: No.

RAPAPORT: Did you, what were your own aspirations?

SARLIS: Well I was just interested in pharmacy so later on I went to pharmacy school and became a pharmacist. And now I'm retired [laughs].

RAPAPORT: What did you do after high school? Did you go straight to college or –

SARLIS: Yes. Two years I went to Sacramento Junior College for two years. Then I went to Sacramento State College for two more years and I got a credential in teaching biology and chemistry, general secondary. And then I went into the army, I got drafted. At that time they had the draft you know, they don't have a draft anymore but at that time I was drafted along with Eugene [laughs]. Along with Eugene and I wound up in France in La Rochelle France, it's a little village on the western coast of France. I stayed there for two years, then I came back to the United States.

RAPAPORT: And then did you have to continue going to school for pharmacy?

SARLIS: Yes, yes yes I went to pharmacy school after that and became a pharmacist for Walgreens company.

RAPAPORT: Can you talk a little bit about the Greek community at the time of your \ growing up?

SARLIS: Well the Greek community, the Greek church was on N Street at that time, it was really a very small church on about 7th and N Street. Later on they moved to the present day location which is across the street from McKinley Park on Alhambra Blvd. and we go to church every Sunday.

RAPAPORT: Were you active in activities outside of the church, in addition to just going to church, like Sunday school or this thing that I can't pronounce

SARLIS: Philoptochos.

MRS. SARLIS: That's for ladies.

SARLIS: No, that's for ladies.

RAPAPORT: Oh, okay [laughs]

MRS. SARLIS: But you were in choir – that's for ladies.

SARLIS: That's a society mostly for ladies. It means "friend of the poor."

RAPAPORT: Okay.

SARLIS: Philoptochos actually means translated "friends of the poor." They help out people that are poor, poor families, you know? I was a member of the Greek Orthodox Choir that was awhile ago.

RAPAPORT: Can you, did members of your family belong to either that American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association or the Greek American Progresssive Association?

SARLIS: Well they didn't, but I did. At one time I belonged to both of them. Belonged to both organizations, but then I eventually dropped out of both –

MRS. SARLIS: GAPA?

SARLIS: Yeah, GAPA, right? Greek American Progressive Association.

RAPAPORT: Can you tell me a little bit about each of them? Just some background about them?

SARLIS: Well as the name suggests American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association emphasized the American way of living whereas the GAPA emphasizes the Greek adjustment to the –

RAPAPORT: What kind of activities, I guess, do those groups organize?

SARLIS: I don't know. I forgot, it's been so long ago, I just kind of forgot.

RAPAPORT: Can you talk a little bit about your involvement with the Greek Orthodox Church now? The role that it plays in your life.

SARLIS: Yeah, we go every Sunday, of course we go to church. And every Wednesday we have bible study and I go with my wife to bible study. We read a short portion of the bible and a priest is there and he explains what we have read.

RAPAPORT: How did you meet your wife?

SARLIS: That was back in 1955. I was drafted and I was going to Greece and at that time she was coming too the United States from Greece. So then we met at church, you know, we went to church and I met her in church, you know. Later on we married.

RAPAPORT: Did your wife, well she grew up in Greece –

SARLIS: Yes.

RAPAPORT: Can you talk a little bit about why she chose to come here if you know that?

SARLIS: Everybody wanted to come to the United States you know cause things are kind of rough back in – there aren't too many opportunities or there aren't as many as there are here.

RAPAPORT: Did she come with her family or by herself?

SARLIS: She came with her brother, her brother George. She has a large family, I have

just one sister but she a large, it's about eight, seven or eight kids, in her family. So she came over with her brother.

RAPAPORT: Was it important to your family that you marry somebody within the Greek community?

SARLIS: I don't know if it was important or not but I figure if you marry within your own nationality you have more things in common, you know.

RAPAPORT: Do you have any children?

SARLIS: Yes I do. I have three. Three, a daughter and two sons. And my daughter's married, she has four children. And my son is married and he has one, one daughter. And my other son isn't married yet. He's still looking [laughs].

RAPAPORT: Did your children go to Greek school?

SARLIS: No.

RAPAPORT: No.

SARLIS: No they didn't.

RAPAPORT: Did they regularly attend church with you?

SARLIS: Yes, yes, yes they did.

RAPAPORT: Did they participate in other activities like Sunday school and things like that?

SARLIS: They did in Sunday school, yes.

RAPAPORT: Was it important to you as a parent that your children developed a strong Greek identity?

SARLIS: Well, like I said they would be more familiar with the Greek culture, but if they

wanted to pursue another I wouldn't object to it.

RAPAPORT: Can you talk a little bit about how as a parent maybe you tried to instill that they were Greek in them?

SARLIS: Yeah, I tried to emphasize that as much as we could. Especially in our reading different words, you know, I would often point out to them that a particular word came from original Greek.

RAPAPORT: Did you speak Greek with your children?

SARLIS: Yes, yes. Well, we spoke kind of a mixture of English and Greek, you know? Half and half you might say [laughs].

RAPAPORT: Did, I was going to ask you this, have you ever gone to Greece?

SARLIS: Yes, yes several times.

RAPAPORT: Do you still know family in Greece?

SARLIS: Well most of the family is here and my wife has two sisters in Australia so we went to Australia, but she has one sister in Greece.

RAPAPORT: Have your children ever been to Greece?

SARLIS: Yes, yes they have.

RAPAPORT: Were they involved in any Greek folk dance groups or any sort of Greek organizations growing up?

SARLIS: Yeah they dance Greek. They know how to dance Greek. And once a year we have the Greek food festival you know at the Sacramento Community Center around August of each year. So they still go there and dance.

That's where Eugene really talks, he talks up a storm about those things [laughs]. He's very very gifted at talking.

RAPAPORT: [laughs] Do you feel that – well this might be more about you – well it could be about you or your children but do you feel that your parents felt any conflict, raising you and your sister, between Greek and American culture? Did you ever feel like there was a conflict to you?

SARLIS: No I don't think there ever was.

RAPAPORT: And then, did you ever feel like there was a conflict with your children with raising them within the Greek and American culture?

SARLIS: No.

RAPAPORT: Was your family's social life here and after you had your children and your grandchildren, is it still, has it maintained largely centered in the Greek community?

SARLIS: Well not as much as it was with me when I was growing up. My son, he doesn't go too much to the Greek church, you know. Now my other son, Milton, he comes to the Greek church once in awhile.

RAPAPORT: Did your children – the two that are married – marry someone that is Greek orthodox?

SARLIS: My daughter did. My daughter married a person from the island of Cyprus you know. And my son Milton, he married an American girl from here.

RAPAPORT: Was that difficult for your family?

SARLIS: No, no. It's his choice you know, so we didn't have too much to say about it.

Fell in love with her and he married her you know. [laughs]

RAPAPORT: Do your grandchildren participate in anything Greek?

SARLIS: Yeah, yes they go to Greek dances and they very much enjoy it.

RAPAPORT: How do you think the Sacramento Greek American community has changed since you've been in Sacramento?

SARLIS: I don't think it's changed that much. It's changed a little bit.

RAPAPORT: Has it increased?

SARLIS: Well, there's more people, yeah. There's more people in church than there originally was.

RAPAPORT: Have there been, like, immigration patterns where there's like a certain time period where a lot of people came or has it been consistently growing do you think?

SARLIS: It's consistently growing I would say. Yeah.

RAPAPORT: Is there anything that you feel like to talk about that, like with church or your social things that you do within your community that you think would be helpful to future people?

SARLIS: Well, I don't do as many activities now as I used to because I'm growing older. I'm 73 years old right now so, but I used to be real active, like in GAPA for a period of time.

RAPAPORT: One of the things that our professor had mentioned is that there is kind of a tension between GAPA and AHEPA with the way people think choices should be made about how to live.

SARLIS: Yeah, a little, but not that much, you know? A little bit of tension you might say.

RAPAPORT: Is it generational do you think?

SARLIS: Just a little bit different emphasis. I guess, you can see it in the name you know: American Hellenic Progressive... Greek American.

RAPAPORT: What the priority is.

SARLIS: Yeah, yeah. Priority is a little bit different, but not that much different, they're, both are pretty much the same. [long pause]

Now is this for a special project with Sacramento State College?

RAPAPORT: Well, this project is a project that Sacramento State's doing with your church. I guess your church wanted this project done so we're helping them out.

SARLIS: Have you interviewed the priest?

RAPAPORT: No, you're my only interview. So you have to tell me everything. [laughs]

SARLIS: You'll probably get a lot more information if you talk to the priest of the church.

RAPAPORT: Yeah, but the kind of interesting thing about doing oral histories is that when you talk to a wide range of people you kind of get a whole, a broad view of the experiences and the perspectives of people.

I presume you've gone to the same church since you have lived here in Sacramento?

SARLIS: Yes, yes yes.

RAPAPORT: Have you known a lot of the same people then for that time period?

SARLIS: Yes, yes, yes.

RAPAPORT: Is it nice to have the same, I guess to have that community and those
friendships?

SARLIS: Yes.

RAPAPORT: Well, is there anything else about your parents or their experiences
immigrating that you think –

SARLIS: Pardon me?

RAPAPORT: Your parents and their experiences immigrating that you didn't get to talk
about?

SARLIS: No. They just came to the United States because they thought there'd be more
opportunities over here. And there was of course, there was.

RAPAPORT: So when your dad left New York he changed businesses, did he always
have his own business he just changed what it was?

SARLIS: Yes, yes, yeah.

RAPAPORT: I think that's it.

SARLIS: That's it already? Okay.

RAPAPORT: Thank you.

SARLIS: Okay. You're welcome.